

*The Seeds of the Gospel Are for ALL People!*

1. Bloom where you're planted.
2. Plant wherever you are.

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.<sup>2</sup> He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.<sup>3</sup> One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.<sup>5</sup> Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.<sup>6</sup> He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

<sup>7</sup> When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants.<sup>8</sup> He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

<sup>9</sup> About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.<sup>10</sup> He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance.<sup>11</sup> He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.<sup>12</sup> It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air.<sup>13</sup> Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

<sup>14</sup> "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

<sup>15</sup> The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

<sup>16</sup> This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

<sup>17</sup> While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate.<sup>18</sup> They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

<sup>19</sup> While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you.<sup>20</sup> So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

<sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism<sup>35</sup> but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.<sup>36</sup> You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.<sup>37</sup> You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—<sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

<sup>39</sup> "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree,<sup>40</sup> but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.<sup>41</sup> He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.<sup>42</sup> He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.<sup>43</sup> All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

<sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.<sup>45</sup> The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.<sup>46</sup> For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said,<sup>47</sup> "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."<sup>48</sup> So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

## The Seeds of the Gospel are for ALL People!

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*  
Ephesians 1:3

Richard Wurmbrand was a Jewish Christian who spent many years in Soviet labor camps because of his faith in Jesus. He was treated very harshly at the hands of his captors. And yet, he still saw these persecutors the way God saw them: as souls for whom Christ died. In his book which is entitled *Tortured for Christ*, he makes the case that one of the main reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union was all the Christians who kept telling the atheistic communists that God sent His Son to bleed and die for them too. Christian after Christian in those labor camps planted the seeds of the gospel wherever they were for whoever would listen. And through that gospel, the Holy Spirit converted many Soviet guards. They were converted so completely that many joined their prisoners under the persecution of the hammer and sickle. According to Wurmbrand, communism collapsed from the inside out. The seeds of the gospel always have an effect no matter who hears it. The gospel causes faith to bloom and grow in the hearts of believers. It can cause faith to spring to life in the hearts of unbelievers. Today we rediscover with Peter and Cornelius how the seeds of the gospel are for ALL people. So bloom where you're planted. And plant wherever you are.

### I.

Peter stood there wondering about the vision he just had. There was no mistaking what Jesus wanted him to do. He told Peter he could now kill and eat any kind of animal—no matter if the Jewish culture considered it clean or unclean. But he sensed that there was a deeper meaning to the vision. What lay behind this vision of all these

animals being let down from heaven by the four corners of what looked like a sheet? What lay behind Jesus' command to kill and eat whatever he wanted now? Peter was about to find out. The Holy Spirit told Peter to go meet the men who were downstairs and go with them to the house of a *Gentile* named Cornelius. Cornelius was a Roman centurion, which meant he commanded 100 soldiers in the Roman legion. He and his family had converted to the Jewish religion, though they were not full-fledged Jews because none got circumcised. The Jews called these kind of converts "proselytes of the gate." Had they been circumcised they would've been called, "proselytes of the law." But even then, they'd still be just Gentiles. Jews did not associate with or even enter the house of Gentiles—even God-fearing proselytes like Cornelius who supported the Jews with generous offerings and regular prayers.

Cornelius sent men to bring Peter to his house because he too had a vision from God. An angel told him that his prayers and offerings were pleasing to God and that he should send for Peter. But how were Cornelius' prayers even heard by God if he didn't know Jesus as his Savior? Oh, Cornelius was a faithful believer. But maybe we'd say he was a faithful *Old Testament* believer. He had heard all the writings of the Old Testament prophets who spoke of the coming Messiah. You might say that God had planted a lot of seeds in the hearts of Cornelius and his family. They even knew about John the Baptist and Jesus and the things they did, but in their *Old Testament* faith, they hadn't learned who Jesus really was—the long awaited Messiah. They hadn't quite connected the dots yet. That would be Peter's job.

Now, Peter had a *New Testament* faith. He knew Jesus for who he really was. But Jesus had been planting seeds in Peter's heart all along as well. Peter still had much to learn. Sure, he had already spent three years with Jesus. But not everything sinks in the first time. Peter had heard Jesus many times tell parables and speak directly about how he came to rescue not just the Jews from their sins, but he came for all the world. He heard Jesus give them the Great Commission too. We heard it in our Gospel reading today, "*Go and make disciples of ALL nations.*" Peter had also heard many of the Old Testament prophets speak of salvation for the Gentiles. So you see, many seeds were planted to teach Peter that the Gospel was for *all* people. But it still didn't sink in—that is, not until the day he met Cornelius.

By the time he stepped through the threshold of the Centurion's house, a new lesson had been learned. The seeds planted long ago by the prophets and watered by Jesus had caused his faith to blossom and grow. One of the first things Peter said after entering Cornelius' house was this: "**I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism<sup>35</sup> but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right**" (34-35). If God didn't see Gentiles as any different than Jews, then Peter wouldn't either.

So after the Holy Spirit brought about new growth in Peter's faith, he used Peter to bring about even greater harvest for Cornelius and his family. What did Peter do? Peter proceeds to connect the dots for them. He reminded them of John the Baptist in the desert and all the amazing things Jesus did because God was with him and anointed him with the Holy Spirit and power. He told them how he and others witnessed all these things including Jesus' death and resurrection, how he ate and drank with Jesus after he had risen. He told them how Jesus given them the Great Commission to go out and do precisely what he was doing that moment—testifying to the gospel. If the gospel were a water hose, Peter turned it on full blast and watered all those seeds planted in the hearts of this Gentile family. "**All the prophets testify about him that *everyone* who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name**" (43). Everyone. That word "everyone" must've meant something new that day for Peter. It certainly meant something new for Cornelius that day. Because right about then, the Holy Spirit came on Cornelius and his family. Through the gospel message spoken by Peter, their Old Testament faith became New Testament faith. Their faith was no longer a faith in a Messiah to come, but a faith in Jesus, who had come. And the Holy Spirit gave visible, audible proof of it. Peter and his companions saw those early church visible signs of the Holy Spirit. They saw these Gentiles speaking in different languages and praising God.

Before this day, Peter would've said that if these men now wanted to become Christians than they would need to purify themselves by circumcision. But Peter's vision and this event taught him that there was no need to see a distinction anymore between clean and unclean animals—no need *ever* to see any distinction between pure and impure races. No, the gospel was for ALL people. Once again, Peter was an eyewitness. Before his eyes that day, the beautiful flower of faith in Jesus Christ bloomed in the hearts of these uncircumcised Gentiles.

But the flower of faith in Peter's heart was opened up wider and fuller that day as well. He learned to see as God sees. He learned to love as God loves. He saw and loved these Gentile Christians in the same way he saw and

loved any Christian. His faith had grown. He was blooming where he was planted. And he still had room to grow...just like us.

We have room to grow too, don't we? Sure, the seeds of the gospel were planted in us. For most of us, our faith sprouted at our baptisms. But we don't always see our need to continue growing in faith. Lately in Boards and at Church Council we've been discussing continuing education for our school and church faculty. No one can deny the need and the value of keeping your skills and knowledge sharp and up to date. But like Peter, we don't always realize how much we still have to learn about Christ and faith. We don't always bloom where we're planted. For Peter and for us, things don't always sink in the first time. And Peter had to even relearn the lesson about the Gentiles. Remember how the Apostle Paul had to rebuke him to his face when he started to separate himself from the Gentile believers again? Consider this: How in your current faith-life do you need to be rebuked? If you don't think you need to be, then perhaps you're forgetting how the sinful nature inside of you needs daily—hourly rebuking. Is the lesson you need to learn similar to the lesson Peter had to learn? Do you need to learn to see ALL people how God sees all people? Do you need to learn to love ALL people the way God loves all people? The sin of prejudice is one of the most decried offenses in our day and age. And yet, if you look hard enough, you *will* see it in yourself. So whom do you tend to see in this world as not deserving the gospel as much as others? For whom are you less likely to pray? With whom are you less likely to muster up courage and plant the seeds of God's Word? Is it the co-worker whose nationality is so different from yours? Is it the homeless woman you keep running into? Is it the crotchety and cantankerous old man you know? Prejudice is everywhere. And unfortunately the deeper we look, the more we'll find it in our own hearts.

But the one heart in which you won't find prejudice, is the heart of God. Remember the words of Peter's awakening? "**I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism**" (34). What a great thing it is! God has no favorites! In fact, ALL are God's favorites. *You* are God's favorite. Had God really played favorites, he would've chosen none of us to be saved. Had God played favorites, only his sinless Son would've won out. But his Son is the One who *made* us all God's favorites. It's because of his Son that God sees us the way he does and loves us the way he does. He no longer sees the prejudice in our hearts. He no longer sees our reluctance to grow in faith. He sees Jesus—Jesus, who always bloomed where he was planted; Jesus, who lived to bear the fruit of salvation for whom?—for all people; Jesus, who let himself wither and die for whom?—for all people; Jesus whom God raised to life...for all people.

So now what is the result for us and our faith-life? Now we can see as God sees. Now we can love as God loves. Like he did with Cornelius and like he did with Peter, the Holy Spirit wants to continue to change and develop, grow and beautify your faith. Like he did with Peter and Cornelius, he wants to continually cultivate and grow the gospel seeds in your hearts. He wants us to bloom where we're planted.

## II.

Part of blooming where we're planted is taking the opportunities the Holy Spirit gives us to plant seeds in others. By the time Peter got to Cornelius and his family, so many gospel seeds had been planted by the Holy Spirit that Peter barely had to speak of Jesus' death and resurrection and the Holy Spirit had come into their hearts. Peter may have wanted to say more, but the Holy Spirit didn't need any more. All Peter needed to do with the gospel was connect the dots from Old Testament Messiah to New Testament Jesus. All he needed to do was uncover a little soil to let faith sprout up.

Now, if you're like me, sharing your faith is scary—especially with people who aren't like you. But are you catching the encouragement that's here for us? When we come across anyone, we don't know what seeds have or haven't been already planted. When we share a truth about Christ, we may not see any visible signs that it sunk in. And sure, that can be discouraging. But we may be merely planting a seed that someone else down the road will water and then someone else even further down the road. And then perhaps someone else will have the privilege of speaking a few gospel truths that give the Holy Spirit all he needs to come into that person's heart. So do you see how we have opportunities to plant seeds and work soil everywhere we are? We don't have to always wait until conditions are ideal. We can plant wherever we are. A gospel truth here. A gospel seed there. And then we leave the results up to God.

But let me guess about another hesitation you have: you're scared to share your faith because you don't know what to say, right? Well, notice again what Peter did. Peter used what some call "the testimonial style" of evangelism. He simply told the centurion and his family what he had seen and heard. **"We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree,<sup>40</sup> but God raised him from the dead...He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead"** (39-41). Witnessing to someone can be as easy as saying, *"Boy, I don't know how I'd make it through life without God."* And then maybe you share how knowing Christ has gotten you through a hard time. Peter simply shared what he had seen and heard—what Jesus meant to him. It doesn't always take much. You don't need to know the latest arguments from science and history to prove the Bible is authentic. And you don't have your Bible memorized cover to cover, though that would help. The pressure's off. *YOU* don't have to do the converting. Let me remind you of Paul's words to the Corinthians, **"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.<sup>7</sup> So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow"** (1 Cor 3:6-7). The pressure's off. And you're not alone. Remember the words of Jesus at the Great Commission from our Gospel reading: **"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age"** (Mt 28:20b). God has put his gospel seed in our hearts and he is with us whenever and wherever we share it.

Richard Wurmbrand knew Jesus was with him wherever he was, whether in a Soviet labor camp or in the freedom of his own home in front of his typewriter. But he saw those who held him captive as God saw them—souls bought with the blood of Christ. He bloomed where he was planted. He planted gospel seeds wherever he was. And he got to watch those seeds grow before his very eyes. Peter and Cornelius were privileged to experience the same. They were open to letting God change their perspectives and grow their faith. *They* bloomed where they were planted. So also, Peter (and Cornelius I'm sure) took the opportunities God placed before them to share what God meant to them. They planted wherever they were. The Holy Spirit gives *us* the same privilege and opportunities to share the seeds of the gospel with ALL people. So bloom where you're planted. And plant wherever you are. Amen.

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,  
since as members of one body you were called to peace.  
Colossians 3:15*

